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# The Response to Suzy Horton's Paper on 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)', from the Perspective of Comparative Education

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## The Response to Suzy Horton's Paper on 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)' from the Perspective of Comparative Education

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In response to Suzy Horton's paper on 'Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)—A Critical Discussion', the paper will first explain the key issues Horton raises in her paper and some relevant comments will be given. Then, a few questions will be asked from the perspective of Comparative Education in order to clarify the context in which SEAL is being implemented. Finally, the author will try to develop the discussion of SEAL by illustrating how such programmes like SEAL could benefit the students or do harm instead.

Horton's paper raises the question of whether emotion can be regarded as a skill, whether such skill can be taught or assessed or measured at schools, and how it narrows and simplifies the complexity of human qualities and capacities to perceive emotion as skill. Overall, I agree to Horton's critiques. SEAL suggests that teaching 'social and emotional skills' helps students to achieve their own goals; however, 'true emotions are unpredictable' and spontaneous (Evans, 2001, p. 116). As Evans points out, 'emotions are not only about how to achieve a given end, but also about what ends to pursue' (p. 124). Moreover, such emotions like joy, distress, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, love, guilt, shame, embarrassment, pride, envy or jealousy etc. are not something assessed or measured by others but something that are to be realised by each individual. Horton's critique of SEAL demonstrates that SEAL designs the emotions well before they are actually felt by the individuals, and that may lead to the confusion among students.

Next, I would like to ask a few questions to Horton from the perspective of Comparative Education. Horton explains the SEL programme in the USA applied Goleman's idea of emotional intelligence. Goleman, who was a journalist, not an educationalist, supported the idea of *positive psychology*<sup>1</sup> and considered school to be the most appropriate place to actualise his idea of emotional intelligence. From the perspective of comparative education, I am interested in the similarities and differences of the emotional intelligence Goleman suggests and the SEL programme in the USA. This question can be replaced with the question of the adequacy of applying Goleman's idea of emotional intelligence into schools in the USA. Horton continues that the influence of the SEAL in UK was the 'growing evidence base from the US on the impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) on a range of areas including school achievement'. My assumption is that although SEAL in UK and SEL in US both introduce 'social and emotional teaching' into schools, the necessity (historical or social background) of its introduction must be somewhat different among these two countries. My second question to Horton is, whether there was any modification of the SEL by the government of UK when applying it as SEAL in

accordance with the context of UK. And if so, how and for what reasons was it modified?

Finally, I would like to elaborate Horton's paper by showing some examples of both positive and negative aspects of teaching 'social and emotional skills' to students. Horton explains that both SEL and SEAL considered that 'work on emotional and social competence and well-being has a 'wide range of educational and social benefits' such as greater educational and work success, improved behaviour, improved learning etc. However, Horton draws our attention to the negative aspect of the SEAL and proposes to be wary about importing it wholesale as a goal. I agree with Horton. One example which is associated with Horton's suggestion can be explained by referring to the students who are under depression because of the violence by classmates, loss of a family member and so forth. These students would not wish to go over the memories of the traumatic event and talk about their feeling and emotions. Such emotions are difficult to be replaced with more positive ones. There are possible dangers of making students talk about their emotions at the wrong time, and that might make things worse than better.

However, it should also be emphasised that such elements like knowing and managing emotions of self and others, suggested in SEAL, are the necessary elements for the students' well-being or happiness. When I was teaching 'Human Relations Theory and Communication' as a lecturer at a Nursing College, some students reported me that they had experienced some better changes in their relation with friends or patients at the hospital, after they learned how to recognise the status of their own or others' emotions. This evidence suggests that such programme like SEAL may work out well on an active agent who is ready or willing to learn, but it could do harm to those who are emotionally fragile at the same time.

## NOTE

- 1 Miller interprets that positive psychology is 'the new science of happiness' (Miller, 2008, p. 591). Referring to Seligman, the acknowledged founder of positive psychology, Miller explains that the central arguments are that (1) happiness can be achieved if a person utilises and develops the positive personality or character traits they are endowed with in purposeful activity and (2) the positive, optimistic attitude toward oneself and to events in general helps enable a person achieve his goals (p. 593). Miller also describes that 'though there are differences in emphasis, the broad idea and conclusions of Goleman's Emotional Intelligence which is cited in the SEAL literature and the positive psychology movement are the same (p. 607).

## REFERENCES

- Evans, Dylan (2001) *Emotion: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, Oxford University Press).  
 Miller, Alistaire (2008) A Critique of Positive Psychology—or 'The New Science of Happiness',  
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